Piecing the Quilt, Stirring the Stew:
Ethnic-American Women's Voices

Various metaphors have been used in an attempt to describe the ethnic diversity of the United States. A common description is the "melting pot" in which many ethnic groups blend together, suggesting assimilation into one group – "Americans." Another description of our diverse population as a patchwork quilt suggests distinct ethnic groups working together yet remaining separate. Both metaphors refer to activities frequently associated with women – cooking and sewing – hence the title of this reading and discussion series, "Piecing the Quilt, Stirring the Stew: Ethnic-American Women's Voices."

One's gender, perhaps, affects the ways in which one copes with the demands of an ethnic community alongside those of one's national identity. Women, especially, are often the "keepers" of the culture, preserving its distinctive flavors and patterns through recipes, crafts, and stories. All of the books in this series, written by women, fiction and non-fiction, have threads in common.

Belonging to an ethnic community often means living in poverty among America's disenfranchised population. In *Arabian Jazz*, when Matussem Ramoud moves his daughters to Euclid, New York, a neighbor child announces to Jemorah, "We're white trash … You're moving into a white-trash town." Mango Street is populated not only by Mexican-Americans but also by refugees from Texas and Tennessee. Cisneros, Abu-Jaber, and Tan all refer to native cultures in which female children were less valued than males, and their books deal, in part, with the older immigrant generation's hopes for their American daughters and nieces. Sunyuan Woo, in *The Joy Luck Club,* dreams, "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!" In *Arabian Jazz*, Melvie interprets her mother's message from beyond the grave as, "I want my girls to be free."

All of the authors describe parents or grandparents or aunts and uncles whose expectations for their modern Mexican-American, African-American, Arab-American, Chinese-American, or Jewish-American daughters, granddaughters, and nieces seem

both unreasonable and at odds with contemporary American society: “Get married!”; “Don’t get a divorce!”; “Don’t take your children to live in New York City!” Four of the five authors describe an older generation who speak broken English and adhere to traditional customs that are both a source of embarrassment as well as a source of humor. Humor is another common thread in all of the books. “My father says when he came to this country he ate hamandeggs for three months. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hamandeggs. That was the only word he knew.” (*The House on Mango Street*) And finally, all five authors depict encounters with racism. Blanche White, an African-American woman who works as a housekeeper, must feign ignorance and embody the stereotype expected by her white employers. When she is told of the death of her employer’s gardener, she responds: “Oh, Lord!” Blanche lifted her apron to her face as she’d seen Butterfly McQueen do in *Gone with the Wind*. If the subject had been anything other than Nate’s death, she’d have had a hard time keeping a straight face. It was the kind of put-on that gave her particular pleasure, but now she only wanted to appear convincingly simple. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Rose Hsu’s future mother-in-law “assured me she had nothing against minorities; she and her husband … personally knew many fine people who were Oriental, Spanish, and even black. But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by a different standard … She said it was so unfortunate the way the rest of the world was, how unpopular the Vietnam War was.” To which Rose responds, “Mrs. Jordan, I am not Vietnamese.”

The House on Mango Street
by Sandra Cisneros

The House on Mango Street is both a collection of prose poems and a coming of age story. The narrator, Esperanza, observes her family, friends, and neighbors, and through them learns about the dual world in which she lives. Even her name symbolizes a kind of duality as well as the so-called “double standard” regarding women. “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting … it is the Mexican records my father plays … It was my great-grandmother’s name … She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse – which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female – but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong.” Her neighborhood is “all brown around” and “safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight

and our eyes look straight." But Esperanza dreams of leaving the neighborhood and the house on Mango Street for "a house all my own."

A Leak in the Heart
by Faye Moskowitz

Faye Moskowitz begins her memoir by recounting the awkwardness and frustration she experienced in France with an imperfect knowledge of the language. Her failure to communicate and her sense of being laughed at cause an overwhelming homesickness: "I wept for the familiar landscape of my home, but most of all, I missed the sound of my own language." And then she remembers her own orthodox Jewish grandmother, at home in Michigan, who refused to speak English.

Growing up in a small Michigan town, Moskowitz longed to be like her classmates or like the characters in books: "I longed to be blond and goyish like Nancy Drew, whose father was *always* taking her on vacation." To save herself from teenage peer pressure, Moskowitz joins the Zionist movement: "At twelve, I enviously watched the teenage girls saunter to Central High in their powder-blue and powder-pink angoras, and I dreamed of the time when I would have my very own fuzzy pastel sweaters to keep in the refrigerator at night. By the time I was fourteen, I was smart enough to see that the sweater set would never welcome me, so I joined the Zionist movement instead."

As a young woman, she finds in her husband's grandmother, Bobbe Frieda, a mentor who helps her reconcile her Jewish heritage with her American aspirations.

The Joy Luck Club
by Amy Tan

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a story of mothers and daughters, of expectation and disappointment, and of wisdom passed from generation to generation. Each of the mothers tells her story of flight from China, all of them leaving ways of life and possessions and sometimes even children and husbands behind, all of them leaving with hope for a future for their daughters that would never be possible in China. The grown daughters are facing crises: divorce, marriage, changing careers, returning to school. The generations seem not to understand each other: "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more." At the same time, mothers and

daughters share a common heritage. “I saw these things with my Chinese eyes,” says Lena St. Clair, “the part of me that I got from my mother.”

Early in the novel, June Woo summarizes the fears of the mothers: “In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation.” But the novel shows that the daughters do, in fact, learn much from their mothers.

Blanche on the Lam
by Barbara Neely

Blanche on the Lam is the first in a series of mystery novels featuring Blanche White, a middle-aged African-American domestic worker who has also taken on the raising of her dead sister’s children. Neely, like all of the authors in this series, describes a dual world, divided between rich and poor, white and black. Blanche’s employers are “people so different from her they might as well be two-headed or made of glass, people who’d never once in their entire lives had to worry about the cost of groceries, paying their rent, or whether they had enough money to buy medicine for a sick child.”

In Blanche, Neely has created a character who is intelligent and refreshingly outspoken, but who, due to limited opportunities for education, has equally limited options. She chooses domestic service because “it at least didn’t have the routine of an assembly line or the tyranny of a supervisor out to make promotion.” Blanche is torn between her independence and her responsibilities – both to her adopted children and, in this novel, to her employer – and struggles with what it means “to be a black woman trying to control her own life and stand firm against having her brain vanillaed.”

Arabian Jazz
by Diana Abu-Jaber

Arabian Jazz opens with a “marriage-emergency” according to the aunts and uncles of Melvina and Jemorah Ramoud, as Jemorah is twenty-nine and still single, but all of Aunt Fatima’s and Uncle Fouad’s efforts to get Melvie and Jem married to appropriate Arab suitors are doomed to fail.

Jem, in particular, is ambivalent about her identity, her home, and her role in life. At one point, she agrees to an engagement to her cousin Nassir and plans to move to Jordan, where she imagines she'll find a sense of belonging. She explains herself: "I'm tired of fighting it out here. I don't have much idea of what it is to be Arab, but that's what the family is always saying we are. I want to know what part of me is Arab. I haven't figured out what part is our mother either. It's like she abandoned us, left us alone to work it all out." To make matters worse, Jemorah's supervisor at work considers her to be "tainted, your skin that color" and offers to help her: "… let me educate you, really get you somewhere. We'll try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you *American.*" But both cousin Nassir and Melvie remind Jemorah that she *is* American: "Where do you think Americans come from, when they're not captured on reservations? They come from other places. That's what an American is!"

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